DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 121 CG 020 787

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TITLE Freshmen Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors Over a 15-Year Period. Research Report #20-87.
INSTITUTION Maryland Univ., College Park. Counseling Center.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 28p.
AVAILABLE FROM Counseling Center, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742-020787.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen; Comparative Analysis; Higher Education; Homosexuality; *Sex Differences; *Sexuality; *Student Attitudes; *Student Behavior; Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

Although investigations of college student sexual attitudes and behaviors have appeared in the literature since the 1960s, assessing long-term attitudinal and behavior patterns is difficult when comparing studies which have employed different populations and different settings. In an attempt to provide information about such long-term patterns while controlling the population and setting, samples of incoming freshmen at the University of Maryland in 1972 (N=750), 1983 (N=460), and 1987 (N=285) completed an anonymous questionnaire assessing their sexual attitudes and beliefs. The results revealed that students in all 3 years were personally more conservative than they believed others to be. Students in recent years expressed more liberal views about homosexuals but were also more likely to indicate that, if they were homosexual, they would want this fact hidden from others. Reported levels of sexual intercourse were lower in recent years. Males in all years reported more liberal personal sexual codes than did females, attesting to the stability of gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors. (Author)

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Freshmen Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors
Over a 15-Year Period

Rose M. Abler and William E. Sedlacek

Research Report # 20-87

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Summary

Although investigations of college student sexual attitudes and behaviors have appeared in the literature since the 1960s (e.g., Bauman & Wilson, 1976; Heltsley & Broderick, 1969; Proper & Brown, 1986), assessing long term attitudinal and behavior patterns is difficult when comparing studies which have employed different populations and different settings. In an attempt to provide information about such long term patterns while controlling the population and setting, samples of incoming freshmen at the University of Maryland in 1972 (N = 750), 1983 (N = 460) and 1987 (N = 285) completed an anonymous questionnaire assessing their sexual attitudes and behaviors.

Students in all three years were personally more conservative than they believed others to be. Students in recent years expressed more liberal views about homosexuals but were also more likely to indicated that, if they were homosexual, they would want this fact hidden from others. Levels of sexual intercourse have become lower in recent years

Freshmen Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors Over a Fifteen Year Period

College student sexual attitudes and behaviors have been the subject of considerable research attention since the mid-1960's (e.g., Bauman & Wilson, 1976; Heltsley & Broderick, 1969; Kaats & Davis, 1970; Proper & Brown, 1986). Long-term investigations of sexual behavior have revealed that, particularly among female students, rates of premarital intercourse increased throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties (Kirschner & Sedlacek, 1983; Robinson & Jedlicka, 1982). In terms of sexual attitudes, Kirschner & Sedlacek (1983) found that group standards for male sexual behavior were constant between 1973 and 1983, but standards for women were more conservative in 1983.

In the recent past, national concern has heightened dramatically over sexually-transmitted diseases, particularly AIDS, evidenced by numerous articles in the popular press (e.g., Church, 1986; Levine, 1986; Murphy, 1986; Thompson, 1986; Wallis, 1986). To what extent have college students internalized those concerns? Recent data on student knowledge of AIDS and perception of risk are reported in Freimuth, Edgar, and Hammond (in press). A study of full-time undergraduate and graduate students (N = 458) revealed

that, with the exception of overestimating risk from one unprotected sexual encounter with an infected person, students accurately rated the risks of various behaviors and knew basic facts about AIDS. However, students were not personalizing the risk of AIDS, even when recognizing that they belong to groups which may be at risk. In other words, "they become spectators to their own peer group while remaining part of the action" (Edgar, Freimuth, & Hammond, in press). Perceptions of personal risk were found to be positively correlated with direct experience with an AIDS patient.

Articles in The Chronicle of Higher Education serve to illustrate this problem. In 1985, university officials were preparing for "a flood of questions about the disease from frightened students" (Biemiller, 1985, p. 38). However, more recently, Hirschorn reported that "AIDS is not seen as a major threat by many heterosexuals on campuses" (1987a, p. 1) and thus it has been difficult to motivate students to use safer sex practices (1987b). Even when students understand the threat of AIDS, they may not translate this knowledge into behavior change, according to Hirschorn (1987b). Kirschner and Sedlacek (1983) noted the critical distinction between sexual attitudes and behaviors. Do students advocate different sexual practices and precautions for others compared to those in which they engage themselves?

Robinson and Jedlicka (1982) found that although student attitudes toward sexual behavior were becoming more conservative, levels of sexual behavior had not changed. This pattern was also supported by the Kirschner and Sedlacek (1983) finding of higher rates of premarital intercourse in the face of more conservative sexual standards for females. Has this pattern held, in spite of recent media attention urging caution in sexual activitity (e.g., Thompson, 1986)? Reports from Hirschorn (1987a; 1987b) indicate that this may be the case, but it is difficult to generalize from speculation or studies where different populations and different methodologies have been employed.

The purpose of this study was twofold: first, to examine whether student sexual attitudes and behaviors have changed over a long period (more than a decade) controlling for population and method. Particular attention will be paid to whether students have become more conservative given the recent increase in popular concern (as cited above) over the possible hazards of indiscriminant sexual activity. The second purpose was to examine student attitutes and behaviors relating to AIDS. Does the pattern suggested by Freimuth et al. (in press) and Hirschorn (1987a; 1987b) hold?

Method

Random samples of incoming freshmen at the a large eastern university were administered an anonymous

questionnaire in 1972, 1983, and 1987. Data were gathered during orientation sessions and the same procedures were followed during all three years. Six AIDS-related items were added to the 1987 questionnaire. Data were analyzed using MANOVA and chi square at the .05 level of significance. With respect to MANOVA, once significance was demonstrated at the multivariate level, univariate analyses were run with LSD post hoc tests.

Results

Description of Samples

1972. A sample of 750 incoming freshmen (53% males; 47% females) with a mean age of 17.68 years (SD = .67) completed the questionnaire in 1972. Most students (67%) reported growing up in suburban areas with 85% having attended public high schools, 10% parochial high schools, and 4% private high schools (1% did not answer). In terms of familiy income, 54% did not know or did not answer, but of the 46% who did respond to this item, the majority (68%) reported family incomes from $15,000 to $30,000 and over.

1983. A sample of 460 incoming freshmen (57% males; 43% females) completed the questionnaire in 1983. The mean age of the sample was 17.77 years (SD = 2.0), with 82% having attended public high schools, 11% parochial high schools, and 7% private high schools. Again, most students (75%) grew up in a suburban area. Regarding family income, of the 80% who

answered this item, 80% reported family incomes above $25,000, with 35% over $50,000.

1987. A sample of 285 incoming freshmen (50% males; 50% females) completed the questionnaire in 1987. Students' mean age was 17.60 years (SD = .52), again, with most (71%) having grown up in suburban areas. Eighty-five percent said they had attended public high schools, 9% had attended parochial high schools, and 6% private high schools. In terms of family income, of the 84% who responded to this item, the large majority (84%) reported incomes of $30,000 and above with more than half (54%) being over $50,000.

Year Differences

Attitudes. Table 1 shows responses to 11 true/false items on a variety of sex-related issues; many significant

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Insert Table 1 about here

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differences were revealed across year. The largest percentage of 1972 students, followed by 1987 students, thought that abortions should be readily available to students without parental consent ($F = 37.48$, $p < .05$). The same pattern was indicated for the perceived availability of campus abortion-related information and referral services ($F = 59.06$, $p < .05$). In terms of the perceived availability of contraceptives, the largest percentage of 1987 students,

followed by 1972 students, and then by 1983 students thought that information and prescriptions were avialble on campus (F = 14.62, $p < .05$). More students in 1972 and 1983 were likely to believe that contraceptives increase promiscuity (F = 5.44, $p < .05$).

An interesting pattern of results related to students' attitudes about homosexuality. 1987 students, followed by those in 1983, were least likey to believe that homosexuals need psychological or medical help (F = 12.81, $p < .05$) yet 1983 and 1987 students more consistently agreed that they would not let anyone know if they were homosexual (F = 13.03, $p < .05$). 1983 students were more likely to believe that there are a lot of homosexuals at the university (F = 4.17, $p < .05$).

Other significant attitudinal differences related to V.D. and masturbation. 1987 and 1972 students were aware of more campus information and treatment for V.D. than were 1983 students (F = 15.1, $p < .05$); and 1972 students were more likely to beleive that masturbation is a normal sexual outlet than were 1983 or 1987 students (F = 57.66, $p < .05$).

Behavior. Table 2 shows seven true/false items to which students responded regarding their sexual behavior. As can be

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Insert Table 2 about here

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seen, several significant differences exist for the three years. The highest levels of intercourse were reported in 1987, followed by 1983, with 1972 being the lowest (F =24.84, $p < .05$). More 1983 and 1987 students reported having had intercourse at least once a month during the last 12 months than did 1972 students (F = 20.85, $p < .05$). Fewer 1983 and 1987 students reported having had a homosexual experience during the last year than did 1972 students (F = 8.59, $p <$ .05).

Premarital sexual standards. Students indicated premarital sexual standards for themselves, for males, and for females. All differences for year were significant at .05. As seen in Table 3, students in 1987 and 1983 more often reported premarital intercourse as part of their personal sexual code. However, a larger proportion of 1987 students indicated that sexual intercourse before marriage was acceptable only with someone with whom they were deeply involved emotionally. Similarly, in reporting the ideal sexual code for males and females, 1987 students more often endorsed premarital sexual intercourse than did 1972 or 1983 students, but a larger percentage of 1987 students limited that endorsement of intercourse to relationships in which there was a deep emotional involvement.

An interesting contrast is evident in perceptions of male behavior; 1987 students, more than those in 1972 or 1983, believed that males engage in sexual intercourse

whenever there is a mutual sex attraction. A discrepancy exists between 1987 students' beliefs about ideal sexual behavior, reports of their own behavior, and their perceptions of other males' sexual conduct. Personal standards and ideal standards were more conservative than what students perceived as others' sexual conduct. A generally similar pattern exists for perceptions of female behavior in that personal standards were more conservative than percpetions of others' behavior.

Sex differences

Premarital sexual standards. As seen in Table 3, significant sex differences exist within each year and across all years for all premarital sexual standards, with the exception of perceptions of female behavior. In all years, females were less likely to include premarital sexual intercourse as part of their sexual code, and when they did, they more often inidicated that they believed in sexual intercourse before marriage only with someone with whom they were deeply involved emotionally. Male students were more likely than female students to indicate a liberal ideal code for males, such as sexual intercourse with people of whom they were fond and toward whom the males felt sexually attracted. A more complex pattern is indicated in the sex differences on ideal female behavior. Each sex most often indicated that premarital intercourse in a deep emotional

relationship is ideal behavior for females. However, female respondents indicated higher agreement with this than did males, and male respondents were more likely to endorse sexual intercourse for females whenever there is a mutual sex attraction. This pattern was particularly evident in 1987.

In terms of actual male behavior, females in all years more often believed that males engage in casual sexual intercourse. In 1987, for example, 70% of the female respondents, compared to 49% of the male respondents, thought that males have sexual intercourse whenever there is a mutual sex attraction. It should be noted that these perceptions of male behavior are in contrast to what males were reporting about their own behavior. Continuing with the 1987 example, only 10% of males indicated that they engage in sexual intercourse whenever there is a mutual sex attraction. These data suggest that both males and females overestimate the amount of casual sexual intercourse for males. Males and females in 1987 were in more agreement about their perceptions of female sexual behavior--no significant differences were indicated here.

1987 AIDS-related sexual attitudes. The largest percentage of both males and females reported either concern without overriding fear or moderate fear about getting AIDS, as seen in Table 4. Only 3% of the males and 1% of the females expressed little or no concern about catching the

disease. The only significant sex difference relates to respondents' perceptions of male attitudes. Twice as many females reported that males did not perceive the risk of AIDS as related to them. Referring back to the data on actual male attitudes, only a very small percentage of males reported little or no concern about AIDS. Again, there appears to be some inaccuaracy in perceptions of males.

1987 AIDS-related sexual codes. As seen in Table 5, males and females differed significantly in their personal behavior, their beliefs about ideal behavior for males, and their perceptions of actual male behavior. Of the 78% of males who indicated that they were sexually active, 76% reported either using a condom (if multiple partners) or limiting sexual activity to a monogomous relationship with a partner whose sexual history is known. Fewer females reported multiple sex partners with the use of condoms; more females indicated that they were virgins but planned to use condoms for protection when they became sexually active.

A greater percentage of males believed that ideal male sexual behavior includes multiple partners with condoms; females were more likely to believe that a monogomous relationship was a better approach for males. In terms of perceptions of male behavior, 22% more females than males thought that males had indiscriminant sex without worrying about protection. However, both males and females greatly

overestimated the number of males who actually engage in this behavior, as indicated by the very small percentage of male respondents who endorsed this item as representative of their own behavior. Males and females were in more agreement in their beliefs about ideal and actual female behavior. It is also interesting that both males and females greatly underestimated the number of females who reported being virgins, as well as overestimated the number reporting sex with multiple partners.

Discussion

A number of interesting results were found in the study. First is the difference between student reports of their own attitudes and behavior versus what they percieved as others' attitudes and behavior. Students in all three years were personally more conservative than they believed others to be. This result indicates that students may hold mistaken beliefs about the extent to which their classmates are sexually active. If peer pressure plays a role in the decision to engage in sexual activity, it may be that students are being influenced by invalid assumptions about common behavior for people their age. Counselors and student affairs professionals could help to correct these mistaken beliefs by educating students, in the context of relevant programs or existing interventions, about the fact that many of their peers choose not to engage in extensive sexual activity

(e.g., whenever there is a mutual sex attraction).

More complex results are apparent in differences over the 15-year period. First, in considering attitudes about homosexuality, recent students endorsed more liberal views of homosexuals, in general, yet also indicated that if they were homosexual, they would want this fact hidden from others. Again, mistaken perceptions about peer views may play a role in this apparent contradiction. If students are not aware that others hold more accepting attitudes toward homosexuals, it is not surprising that they would want this fact hidden about themselves. Also, the AIDS crisis could be playing a role for 1987 students, in particular. Fears about being viewed as AIDS carriers if their homosexuality were known could be influential. Counselors and student affairs professionals who want to intervene here might bring students together to talk frankly about homosexuality and AIDS. Orientation, structured groups, conferences, and other programs with this theme might be helpful. Homosexual students who discover that their classmates have accepting views about homosexuality may feel less need to remain "in the closet."

Have students become more conservative in their sexual behavior? Again, the results are complex. From reports of actual behavior, it appears that levels of sexual intercourse, significantly higher than in 1972, have

stabilized over the last several years. However, from reports of personal sexual codes, this pattern is not as clear. A conflict between attitudes and behaviors could be playing a role here.

Interesting results are also apparent in considering male/female differences. The fact that males in all years reported more liberal personal sexual codes than did females attests to the stability of gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors.

A consideration of subjects' honesty is something that must be dealt with whenever self-report measures are used in studying such topics as sexuality. Students may have been more honest in reporting their attitudes than in reporting their behaviors. An indication that this may have been the case is, in all years, the very small percentage of students who reported having had an abortion (or, if males, that their sexual partner had had an abortion) compared to much larger numbers of students who reported knowing someone who had an abortion. Where are all these students? Behaviors could be either underreported or overreported, depending on the stigma or the degree of peer pressure associated with the particular behavior.

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Table 1

Percent Agreement with Attitude Items - 1972, 1983, 1987

	Percent Agreement 1972	1983	1987	Signficance at .05
1. Contraceptive information and precriptions are available on campus.	95	91	100	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987 1983 v 1987
2. Information and treatment for V.D. is available on campus.	96	89	94	1972 v 1983 1983 v 1987
3. Information and aid in seeking abortion is available on campus.	96	75	86	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987 1983 v 1987
4. There are a lot of homosexuals at the University.	38	31	40	1972 v 1983 1983 v 1987
5. Having contraceptives available increases promiscuity.	33	35	24	1972 v 1987 1983 v 1987
6. Abortions should be readily available to students without parental consent.	82	61	68	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987 1983 v 1987
7. I personally know one or more homosexuals.	25	26	30	
8. Masturbation is a normal sexual outlet.	85	58	64	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987
9. I think homosexuals need psychological or medical help.	54	45	37	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987 1983 v 1987
10. Students who do not have sexual intercourse before marriage are considered strange.	14	14	19	
11. If I were a homosexual, I would be sure not to let anyone know.	56	70	68	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987

Note: Differences are based on LSD post hoc tests.

Table 2

Percent Agreement with Behavior Items - 1972, 1983, 1987

	Percent Agreement 1972	1983	1987	Significance at .05
1. I have had intercourse at least once a month during the last 12 months.	14	27	27	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987
2. (For Females) I have had an abortion during the last 12 months.	5	5	2	
3. (For Males) I was sexually involved with someone who had an abortion in the last 12 months.	3	5	4	
4. I have had at least one homosexual experience during the last year.	5	2	1	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987
5. I have never had intercourse.	51	37	28	1972 v 1983 1972 v 1987
6. I know someone who had an abortion during the last year.	48	47	52	
7. I have had intercourse with one person only.	26	25	32	

Note: Differences are based on LSD post hoc tests.

Table 3

Percent of Males and Females by Year

Endorsing Sexual Codes of Self, Males, and Females

	All Years			1972			1983			1987		
	M	F	All	M	F	All	M	F	All	M	F	All
Personal Code												
1	4	6	5	5	7	6	3	7	5	2	4	3
2	14	22	18	18	24	21	14	24	18	5	14	10
3	35	60	46	32	58	44	36	57	45	39	68	54
4	33	11	23	29	10	20	33	10	23	44	13	28
5	14	1	8	16	1	9	14	2	9	10	1	5
Ideal Code for Males												
1	4	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	1	3	2
2	15	15	15	18	15	17	15	18	17	5	9	7
3	33	56	43	32	57	43	31	51	40	38	59	49
4	32	17	25	31	18	25	28	17	24	39	14	26
5	17	8	13	15	5	10	21	10	16	17	15	16
Ideal Code for Females												
1	5	6	5	5	6	6	6	7	6	1	4	3
2	19	20	20	22	23	22	19	23	21	13	9	11
3	45	62	53	39	59	49	48	57	52	55	74	65
4	23	10	25	25	10	18	18	11	15	24	11	18
5	9	1	13	9	2	6	10	2	6	7	1	4
Perception of Male Behavior												
1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
2	4	3	3	6	3	5	2	3	2	0	0	0
3	14	9	12	17	13	15	14	6	11	6	1	3
4	45	36	41	45	40	43	44	35	40	45	28	36
5	37	52	44	31	43	37	39	55	45	49	70	60
Perception of Female Behavior												
1	1	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	1	1	0	0
2	9	6	7	14	8	11	4	6	5	2	0	1
3	42	43	42	44	53	48	43	37	41	31	26	28
4	40	44	42	35	34	35	37	47	42	57	64	61
5	9	7	8	7	4	5	14	9	12	9	10	10

Note: The numbered codes are as follows:
1 = I do not believe in sexual intimacy - intercourse or anything close to it - before marriage.

Table 3 (continued)

2 = I believe in some sexual intimacy but not intercourse before marriage.
3 = I believe in sexual intercourse before marriage only with someone I am deeply invloved with emotionally.
4 = I believe in sexual intercourse with people I am fond of and to whom I am sexuallyattracted.
5 = I believe in sexual intercourse whenever there is a mutual sex attraction.

Note: All sex differences are significant at .05 except for 1987 perception of female behavior. All year differences are significant at .05 except for perception of female behavior.

Table 4

Percent of 1987 Males and Females Indicating AIDS-Related Sexual Attitudes for Self, Males, and Females

	Males	Females
Personal Attitude		
1	16	21
2	43	41
3	38	37
4	2	1
5	1	0
Ideal Attitude for Males		
1	27	28
2	37	47
3	33	21
4	3	4
5	1	1
Ideal Attitude for Females		
1	27	29
2	41	50
3	29	18
4	3	3
5	1	0
Perception of Actual Male Attitude		
1	6	8
2	28	22
3	48	36
4	14	27
5	5	7
Perception of Actual Female Attitude		
1	9	10
2	35	30
3	41	38
4	13	19
5	2	3

Note: The numbered codes are as follows:
1 = I am extremely worried about getting AIDS through any contact, sexual or social/casual.

Table 4 (continued)

2 = I am worried about getting AIDS but I don't believe I will get it unless I have sex with or share a needle with an infected person.
3 = I get concerned about the AIDS reports I read but it's not an overriding fear for me.

4 = I think a lot of the AIDS reports have been blown out o proportion by the media, and there's no reason for me to be concerned about AIDS.
5 = I don't think anybody should worry about getting AIDS. Those experts don't really know what causes it and until then why worry?

Note: Significant sex differences at the .05 level were found for perception of actual male attitude.

Table 5

Percent of 1987 Males and Females Endorsing AIDS-Related Sexual Codes

	Males	Females
Personal Behavior		
1	5	9
2	16	35
3	42	49
4	34	8
5	2	0
Ideal Behavior for Males		
1	4	3
2	12	18
3	45	57
4	37	17
5	2	5
Ideal Behavior for Females		
1	6	6
2	15	21
3	61	64
4	17	10
5	2	0
Perception of Actual Male Behavior		
1	0	0
2	3	2
3	15	6
4	61	50
5	20	42
Perception of Actual Female Behavior		
1	2	0
2	4	4
3	38	32
4	53	59
5	4	5

Note: The numbered codes are as follows:
1 = I am a virgin and do not plan to have sex until I am married. I expect the same from my future partner.
2 = I am a virgin but when I do become sexually active I plan to be selective and take precautions, such as using a condom.

Table 5 (continued)

3 = I only have sex with a partner whose sexual history I know and with whom I have a monogomous relationship.
4 = I do have sex with multiple partners but I make sure condoms are used for protection.
5 = I have sex with whoever I please and I don't worry about so-called "protection."

Note: Significant sex differences at the .05 level were found for all categories except ideal behavior for females and perception of actual behavior for females.